

Wednesday, May 11, 2011

House Committee on Agriculture

Testimony in opposition of HBs 4503-4507

Dr. Greg Peter – Member of the Michigan Feral Swine Working Group and Wildlife Disease Policy Advisor to Michigan United Conservation Clubs

Dear Chairman Daley and Members of the Committee,

If we could have eradicated an invasive species problem like zebra mussels early in the infestation – wouldn't we have wanted to do so? Millions of dollars of damage have resulted from their introduction and many other states in the USA can attest to how damaging feral swine can be. By comparison, the zebra mussel is relatively benign. The Texas Department of Agriculture estimates that wild hogs cause over \$400 million in damage each year. The important message I would like to convey to our legislators is that we begin to regard feral swine and European wild boar, in particular, as an invasive species problem – just like zebra mussels.

The husbandry of such a potentially destructive and dangerous species to benefit a VERY few Michigan breeders is extremely shortsighted and ill-advised. The Natural Resources Commission and the Agriculture Commission passed a Joint Resolution #12 (pp. 4-5 below) over three years ago stating that a desirable position would be the prohibition of such a practice. Wisconsin has recently done so - <http://www.jsonline.com/news/wisconsin/43435592.html> . It is about time we follow suit here in Michigan and take decisive action to shut off the "faucet" which supplies the escapees into the wild. Demographic and topological evidence is irrefutable that the source of the wild boar infestation is the escape from facilities that are breeding wild boar – a practice that should be prohibited under Michigan law in accordance with the resolution of our advisory governmental bodies.

The alternative would be a quagmire of regulation and with little funding to pursue enforcement, the result would be an ineffectual effort. The reproductive capability of this invasive, exotic species will defeat any attempt to eradicate this problem in the absence of compliance with the NRC/AC resolution. With further delay, this rapidly growing population will reach an endemic level. The regulation cost of such a small industry would be out of proportion to the possible benefit of retaining the industry. Not to mention the lack of funds to do so. There are more important issues for state agencies to expend the few dollars they have. The best way to eliminate swine outside of enclosures is to turn off the supply completely - not regulate it to a trickle.

I attended a national conference on feral swine in 2008 in St. Louis, Missouri and I have appended three general conclusions below from an executive digest I wrote. The most important conclusion, I believe, relates to the potential of disease problems that feral swine can harbor. In many places these animals are infected with zoonotic diseases (that which humans can contract). In addition, and potentially very economically damaging, they threaten the livestock industry in our state. In 2008, three wild boar herds that have been destroyed because they were

positive for Pseudorabies, a disease Michigan swine industry has been free of since the early 1990s. This depopulation cost the cash-strapped State of Michigan \$415,000 in indemnity payments. Feral swine have also been known to harbor tuberculosis and with our existing problem with this disease, the potential complication is ominous. Since feral swine eat anything with an available calorie, it is not a far stretch to imagine the ease with which they could be exposed to and infected with TB.

Lastly, but certainly not the least of concerns would be the devastation these mobile, nomadic “rototillers” can have on sensitive habitats, agricultural plantings, and urban landscapes. The environmental damage done in endemic states is extensive. In addition, feral swine are known to be predators of ground nesting birds (pheasants, grouse, wild turkey) and even fawns. Michigan outdoors men and women would not be pleased, nor would the non-hunting public who value our woods and water. Hunters and anglers spend over \$3.4 billion in Michigan each year, which has an economic ripple effect of over \$5.9 billion, according to the Congressional Sportsmen Foundation. This spending supports 46,000 jobs, \$1.7 billion in salaries and wages, and \$378 million in state and local taxes. Our outdoor traditions are at risk if Michigan does not take strong action to eliminate wild hogs from our state. Hunting, fishing and trapping rely on a healthy environment, which supports our state’s tourism economy. Along with agriculture, tourism is one of the strongest industries left in this state. These pigs threaten it all – and a weak regulatory structure to keep an industry afloat that relies on invasive species as its major cash crop is not sound public policy.

I would like to leave with an invitation to any committee member or their staff to ask of me any question or request a visit to discuss this issue.

Respectfully submitted

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**Feral Swine Conference  
St Louis, MO April 13-15, 2008**

**General Conclusions:**

First and foremost – Immediate and aggressive action by Michigan was repeatedly reinforced as necessary by presentations from (and the following hallway conversations with) folks dealing with feral swine on a chronic, endemic basis as well as those with subchronic emerging problems. The window of opportunity is narrow – before attitudes, public perceptions, and expectations become entrenched. Stressing the eradication of an invasive and destructive exotic species is the best course of action. This will preempt the complications caused by the perception of feral swine as a “hunting opportunity”. In addition, the populations are small and somewhat geographically defined, allowing the possibility of success, but the high reproductive capacity of this species narrows further the window of opportunity.

Second –Facilitating this urgent need to ACT requires the elevation of concern at the highest level of state government and the concerned agencies. The institutional will power to solve this problem and the contingent funding to do so must be assured at the level of the governor’s office. If the MDA is the lead agency, then the FSWG must insist that they pursue this agenda aggressively. The establishment of a Governor’s Task Force as in Missouri would be an appropriate action.

Third – Failing to eradicate FS would prove to be disastrous as witnessed by the experience elsewhere in the USA. Inevitably, this population of nomadic creatures becomes infected with diseases that threaten both agricultural enterprise (swine brucellosis, Pseudorabies, tuberculosis) and human health (avian and swine influenza, tuberculosis), not to mention the environmental/ecological damage to habitat. Contingency plans for disease control should be in place soon in the event of eradication failure and establishment of an endemic population of this invasive, exotic species

**Joint Resolution adopted by the Michigan Natural Resources Commission and  
Commission of Agriculture on April 12, 2007\***

**TO PREVENT THE ESTABLISHMENT OF FERAL SWINE IN MICHIGAN  
Resolution #12**

**WHEREAS, free-ranging swine are not among the native wildlife of Michigan and the free-ranging swine population that exists today is a combination of free-ranging pigs that have been captured elsewhere and released for the purpose of starting local wild, free-living populations, escaped or neglected domestic swine, and/or Eurasian wild boar that originated on farms, privately owned cervidae (POC) facilities, game ranches, wild game breeding facilities, and other enclosed hunting ranches; AND**

**WHEREAS, these swine are aggressive, destructive, and often difficult to contain with fences; AND**

**WHEREAS, feral swine in Michigan's open spaces cause crop damage, pose a serious threat to the health and welfare of domestic swine, endanger humans, impact wildlife populations, and impact the environment by disrupting ecosystems; AND**

**WHEREAS, while there is no present indication that feral swine in Michigan are carrying diseases such as pseudorabies, brucellosis, bovine tuberculosis (TB), or trichinosis, the potential for this to become a serious problem exists; AND**

**WHEREAS, Michigan's success in achieving pseudorabies and swine brucellosis free status through the 1980s and 1990s, and later experience with bovine TB in wildlife and cattle and the economic hardship that this disease has caused, strongly suggests that every precaution should be taken to stop the establishment of feral swine in Michigan's environment; AND**

**WHEREAS, state law currently prohibits the importation and release of feral swine or swine crossbred with feral swine as this is a felony punishable by not less than \$1,000.00; AND**

**WHEREAS, biologists and professionals from other state departments of agriculture and natural resources have advised that typical penalties are inadequate to curb this illegal activity; AND**

**WHEREAS, ownership and ownership responsibility of escaped exotic swine from established facilities often cannot be established because current law may not require these animals to be tagged with official, unique identification; AND**

**WHEREAS, there are no provisions in state law for regulatory oversight of the pursuit of swine and at least 40 facilities offer some sort of exotic swine shooting opportunities in Michigan; AND**

**WHEREAS, to date, joint surveillance efforts by (Michigan Department of Agriculture) MDA, DNR, and the United States Department of Agriculture, (USDA), wildlife services indicate that feral swine have been sighted in over 55 Michigan counties and in several locations feral sows with piglets have been confirmed; AND**

**WHEREAS, as MDA's Animal Industry Division Director and DNR's Wildlife Division Chief have no confidence that swine can reliably be maintained in captivity under husbandry conditions such as those prevailing on privately-owned shooting ranches; AND**

**WHEREAS, wildlife and agriculture experts have serious concerns about the impact and risks related to feral swine populations and are troubled by the fact that existing law does not adequately consider these newly emerging pests; in addition, experience in other states demonstrates aggressive action is the only way to eliminate feral swine.**

**NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED, the Joint Commissions on Agriculture and Natural Resources recommend aggressive action to eliminate feral swine in order to protect animal health, public health, and the environment by directing the Michigan Departments of Agriculture and Natural Resources to pursue the following recommendations:**

- **Ban all recreational shooting of swine behind fences.**
- **Depopulate swine from all Michigan Privately Owned Cervid (POC) ranches, game ranches, wild game breeding facilities and other enclosed hunting ranches.**
- **Depopulate and seek indemnity for those swine described above not otherwise hunted for profit or sent to slaughter by a determined date.**
- **Prohibit husbandry practices that involve raising swine for recreational shooting (such as wild pigs, razorbacks, piney-woods rooters, Russian and Eurasian boars, and crosses) for sale or transfer.**
- **Prohibit the sale, importation, or transfer of swine for the purpose of recreational shooting.**
- **Allow year-round shooting of feral swine as nuisance animals.**
- **Increase fines related to the importation and release of feral swine into Michigan.**
- **Use federal funds to trap, test, and remove feral swine from private property**

**\*This resolution was adopted by majority vote at the joint meeting of the Michigan Commission of Agriculture and the Michigan Natural Resources Commission on April 12, 2007 at the Lansing Center, 333 E. Michigan, Lansing, Michigan. The resolution was also adopted in its entirety by members of Michigan United Conservation Clubs as the organization's official policy at the 2008 MUCC annual convention.**

